

Characteristics of the Ignatian Charism

St Ignatius' Milestones

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was the first General of the Jesuits. Members of his Order served the Pope as missionaries. They were an important force, especially during the Counter-Reformation. Ignatius was a talented spiritual director. He recorded his method in a small but celebrated treatise known as the *Spiritual Exercises* – a simple set of mental exercises, meditations, and prayers, published in 1548, for those giving the *Exercises*.

Iñigo was born in the Castle of Loyola in the Basque region of Spain, the youngest of thirteen children. His mother died soon after his birth. As a boy, he became a page and as a young man he had a great love for the military and yearned for chivalric fame. At the age of 17, he joined the army. He was a dreamer, a fancy dresser and a womaniser, who was sensitive to insults. Once he challenged a Moor to a duel for denying the divinity of Jesus. He took up arms but was known also for his leadership and diplomatic skills, which made him useful to the then Duke. In the battle of Pamplona in 1521, he was gravely injured by a cannonball which shattered his right leg. He later convalesced at his father's castle where his sister-in-law gave him books on the lives of the saints and the imitation of Christ, which precipitated a conversion and call to religious life. He wished to follow the example of St Francis of Assisi and other saints who burned with zeal and fervour. He visualised himself fighting for Christ and experienced consolation as distinct from the desolation

and dissatisfaction he experienced when contemplating romantic dreams of heroism. This was the time when he was learning about discernment. He went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and enjoyed several mystical visions. He made a confession in the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat and lived in the nearby town of Manresa for about a year, begging, volunteering in the local hospital, and praying in a cave. It was a time of rigorous religious asceticism. It was also here where he formulated the fundamentals of his *Spiritual Exercises*. At the age of 31, he returned to Barcelona to study for entrance to the university where he read theology and Latin. He was briefly interrogated by the Inquisition but released later. He moved to Paris to pursue postgraduate studies in theology and completed his MA in 1535 at the age of 43. He gathered around him six companions. Francis Xavier and Peter Faber were his roommates and closest associates in founding the Jesuit Order. They took solemn vows and were joined later by others including Francis Borgia, of the famed House of Borgia. In 1539, Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus (with Peter Faber and Francis Xavier), which was approved by Pope Paul III a year later. Master Ignatius becomes Father General. He sends his companions out as missionaries throughout Europe to found schools, colleges, and seminaries. His book is given papal permission to be printed. With the help of his secretary, he writes the Jesuit *Constitutions*, adopted in 1553 for the organisation of his Order. His motto becomes *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* – ‘For the Greater Glory of God’. Ignatius dies in Rome as a result of the fever (malaria) on 31 July 1556. He was beatified by Pope Paul V in 1609 and canonised in 1622 by Pope Gregory XX. The legacy he leaves is lasting.

The Manresa Experience

Many commentators have distinguished in his *Autobiography* three phases of his (seminal) Manresa experience (1522-23):

- Days of light (after his conversion, peace, and joy, from April to May).
- Days of darkness (doubts, desolation, devastating battle with scruples, suicidal ideation, from May to the end of July).
- Days of glory (enlightenment; a series of mystical experiences, from August to mid-February).

We might note *five* groups or themes of mystical enlightenment he enjoyed, which were deeply theological:

- The Trinity (that God is one in three divine persons): that God is a communion.
- Creation (of how God created the world): all that God makes is good.
- Eucharist (of how Christ is substantially/sacramentally present): here God shares His divine life with us.
- The humanity of Christ: Jesus, though God, is like us in all things except sin.
- A vision of Our Lady (Mary models our relationship with her Son and the Father).

These experiences were surpassed by another one known as the ‘great enlightenment’ (‘sublime illumination’) which took place on the banks of the river Cardoner. For Ignatius, God is *experienced*. Ignatius himself had physical reactions to his own mystical experiences which were deeply Trinitarian and Christocentric (he had twelve visions of the Trinity and four visions of Jesus as mediator of the Trinity), though he was reticent/reserved in talking about them. His language is terse; it does not overflow with nuptial metaphors. His is a mysticism of service (love expressed in deeds). This is the meaning of *magis* – service as discreet loving. The two great mystical landmarks were Manresa and La Storta, when he was on his way to the Holy Land via Rome. In the latter, God places Ignatius with His son bearing His cross (‘I shall be favourable to you in Rome’). Mystical union is solidified through service. La Storta was the climax of Ignatius’ own life and the starting point for his companions in the Society of Jesus. Unlike La Storta (and Loyola), Ignatius experienced no vision in his (foundational) Manresa experience, but the eyes of his understanding were opened. The ‘Principle and Foundation’ (the purpose of our lives) and indeed the whole of his *Spiritual Exercises* stemmed from the Manresa (river Cardoner) experience, concluding in the contemplation to attain divine love – finding God in all things. The Ignatian emphasis is on deeds (service) and prayer (faith) – this is at the heart of the Ignatian charism, that is to say, to be a contemplative in action and men for others (*hominis pro aliis*). The Jesuit adopts a contemplative stance towards the world. He sees his spiritual life not as enclosed within the walls of a monastery but rather he sees the

world itself as the monastery. The Jesuit way of proceeding (as it is known) is based on:

- Contemplation
- Discernment
- Action

The Examen and the *Exercises* are tools to aid this mystical encounter with the Lord who labours in His creation (sacred toil). God is actively present and working in the world. The world is, in truth, a holy place, observed Jesuit palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin. It's the theatre of a divine drama. Our task is to attune ourselves to the flow of divine presence.¹ This involves a twofold axis: the Absolute's action and our participation, as well as ongoing discernment (imagination + spiritual sense = discernment). The aim is to elicit our divine desires and to pose to ourselves this question: how can I collaborate with the Trinity (*Sat-Chit-Ananda*: Being-Consciousness-Bliss), as we try to find where 'God' dwells deeply in our lives? So, Ignatian spirituality is a mysticism of *practice*, drawing on several previous Christian traditions. There is no single method of Ignatian prayer. Indeed, at least *ten* ways of praying are mentioned by him in the *Exercises*, including Gospel meditations which Ignatius calls contemplations, application of the senses, the Examen, and the third way of praying (found in the additional material at the end of the *Exercises*), which is somewhat like the Hesychasm in Eastern Christianity. There is neither 'depth language' such as one finds in Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics nor nuptial language that suffuses the *Song of Songs*, which one finds in the Cistercian and Beguine writers. There is no apophatic language that one finds in St John of the Cross. Though Ignatius mentions the purgative and illuminative paths, there is no *explicit* mention of transforming union. However, it should be stated that his emphasis on the interior movements (*mociones*) of the soul implicitly point to the indwelling Trinity.

1. See Stephen J. Costello, *Philosophy and the Flow of Divine Presence* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013).

The Jesuit Mystique

What comes to mind when you think of a Jesuit? A figure in a black soutane? Intelligence? Soldier of Christ? Militaristic? Masculine? Influential? Practical? A story highlights this last dimension: A group of Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits were having a big meeting that went well into the night. Suddenly all the lights went out in the meeting room. The Benedictines immediately started chanting Psalms glorifying God, the Franciscans took out their guitars and sang songs praising all creation, and the Dominicans began preaching about the metaphysics of light and darkness; meanwhile the Jesuits went to the basement, found the fuse box, and reset the breaker.

Intelligent? This story illustrates their reputation for being 'Jesuitical' – a tad too clever. There is always a right way and a wrong way to proceed: Two Jesuit novices both wanted a cigarette while they prayed. They decided to ask their superior for permission. The first asked but was told no. A little while later he spotted his friend smoking. 'Why did the superior allow you to smoke, but not me?' he asked. His friend replied, 'Because you asked if you could smoke while you prayed, and I asked if I could pray while I smoked!'

Educators? A joke underlines this facet of the Order: A Jesuit, a Dominican, and a Franciscan were walking along an old road, debating the greatness of their Orders. Suddenly, an apparition of the Holy Family appeared in front of them, with Jesus in a manger and Mary and Joseph praying over him. The Franciscan fell on his face, overcome with awe at the sight of God born in such poverty. The Dominican fell to his knees, adoring the beautiful reflection of the Trinity. The Jesuit walked up to Joseph, put his arm around his shoulder, and said, 'So, have you thought about where to send the boy to school?'

Sharks? Or wolves in sheep's clothes? When their ship sank a Benedictine, a Dominican, a Franciscan, and a Jesuit were crowded into a small lifeboat. It had a small leak and was in ever greater danger of sinking. Unfortunately, the boat was also surrounded by sharks. So, the Dominican, confident in the preaching prowess of his Order, stood up and began to preach to the sharks about Christian charity; but his sermon was cut short by a leaping shark who consumed him in one gulp. Then the Benedictine stood up and began to charm the sharks with a stupendous rendition of the *Exsultet*, but another shark dispatched him with a single gulp. Shortly thereafter the Franciscan, began to pray, 'Blessed are you, Lord my God, for brother shark ...'

when one of the sister sharks cut him off in mid-benediction. Soon the lifeboat sank, leaving the Jesuit in the water with the sharks. But instead of eating him, several sharks towed him to shore and cast him up on the dry land. Stunned, he turned to ask them why they had not devoured him. They replied, ‘professional courtesy!’

Worldly? A man walked up to a Franciscan and Jesuit and asked, ‘How many novenas must you say to get a Mercedes Benz?’ The Franciscan asked, ‘What’s a Mercedes Benz?’ The Jesuit asked, ‘What’s a novena?’

Self-important? A Jesuit, a Franciscan, and a Dominican die and go to Heaven. They are ushered into God’s throne room, where God is seated on an immense, diamond-encrusted gold chair. God says to the Dominican, ‘Son of St Dominic, what do you believe?’ The Dominican answers, ‘I believe in God the Father, Creator of Heaven and earth’. God asks the Franciscan, ‘Son of St Francis, what do you believe?’ The Franciscan says, ‘I believe in your son, Jesus, who came to work with the poor’. Finally, God turns to the Jesuit and from his great throne asks, ‘Son of St. Ignatius, what do you believe?’ The Jesuit says, ‘I believe ... you’re in my seat!’

Hallmarks of Ignatian Spirituality

Jesuits make up the largest male religious Order in the Catholic Church. Ignatian spirituality is marked by certain characteristics or qualities. Below, I note some *twenty* such:

- Roman Catholic with a Marian dimension; priestly; kataphatic; and apostolic.
- Mystical (God in all things is the heart of the *Exercises*; being a ‘contemplative in action’).
- Practical (worldly rather than monastic or mendicant – adaptable, flexible, and utilisable by laypeople).
- Linking faith with justice (the ‘preferential option for the poor’).
- Freedom (an inner freedom from inordinate attachments and disordered desire: Ignatian ‘indifference’).
- Mindful (the daily Examen of consciousness).
- Intellectual (their training involves a long formation in philosophy and theology).

- Imaginative (the imagination is employed as an aid to prayer in the ‘application of the senses’ and the ‘composition of place’).
- Due attention is given to the emotions (the *Exercises* and Examen require us to sift through our feelings for signs of ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’).
- Individual and communal (in the *Exercises*, St Ignatius insists that no one should come between creature and Creator; Jesuits see ‘community as mission’ as per the 35th General Congregation).
- Men for others (servant leadership).
- Holistic and integral with its *cura personalis* (care of the whole person: body, soul, and spirit).
- Political (with its missionary work and stress on social justice).
- The art of discernment (a sound methodology for good decision-making).
- Psychological (emphasis placed on identifying one’s desire: *Id quod volo*).
- Collaborative (there is a communal support structure *vis-à-vis* the idea of meeting regularly with a spiritual director).
- Committed choice (*magis/más*: ‘the more’ that we want, and that God wants for us; *en todo amar y servir*: ‘in all things, to love and to serve’).
- Reforming in nature (not just historically in terms of being a modern Order set up at the time of the Catholic Counter-Reformation but returning to its radical roots).
- Innovative (the Order was a radically new departure in religious life, and it has carried this reforming zeal and innovative mindset down the centuries).
- Controversial (the Jesuit *mystique* has attracted its share of critics/detractors over the centuries).

(We may note *en passant* that in astronomy, 35 lunar craters have been named after Jesuit scientists.) And all the above in the context of the Jesuits being a priestly Order of the Catholic Church, whose members take vows of chastity, obedience, poverty, as well as a fourth vow of fidelity to the Pope in matters of mission. Indeed, in the 13th Rule of the *Exercises*, Ignatius opines, ‘What seems to me white,

I will believe black if the hierarchical Church so defines'. That said, there is an ecumenical aspect present too, in that the *Exercises* of St Ignatius are not confined to Catholics. Indeed, I know several Anglican priests who are steeped in the Ignatian method of meditation and St Stephen's House, a Church of England theological college and permanent House of Oxford University, taught Ignatian meditation to its ordinands for decades. One might not be able to become an Anglican Jesuit but there is such a thing as an Ignatian Anglican.¹ Further, there is a group of Lutherans in Sweden who have established 'Kompass', which is an ecumenical Ignatian network.

Jesuit Work

We can highlight at least *four* prominent ways in which Jesuits excel:

- Extending beyond the cultural and existential frontiers which the institutional Church can reach.
- Giving the *Spiritual Exercises* and spiritual direction, including the discernment of spirits.
- Intellectual apostolate.
- Martyrdom.

Their primary work centres on:

- Education.
- Spirituality.
- Mission.

The First Principle and Foundation (the Mission Statement of the Order, if you like) of the *Exercises* reads: 'Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God Our Lord [*homo creatus est laudare*] and by this means to save his soul'. Surely this is the cornerstone of Christianity everywhere and a mark of the Church Catholic, be it Reformed, Roman, or Orthodox? St Ignatius' *Exercises* and Examen represent a spiritual treasury and rich heritage of the undivided Church.

1. For an illuminating article on the crossovers and connections between Anglicanism and Ignatian spirituality, see Paolo Gamberini, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Anglican Ethos: A Family Resemblance', *One in Christ*, 49 (2015), pp. 2-21.